

## Reading Guide for *Hallam's War* by Elisabeth Payne Rosen

### About the Book

Hugh and Serena Hallam are a loving couple made for a life of simple splendor. But history will not cooperate. They see themselves as humane and politically moderate people, but problems are sprouting in the lush, green Tennessee valley they farm to raise their family. For one, there's a journalist from up North who has come to interview them, and they think, to judge them. He, though, is only a harbinger of the fiery judgments to come. Their earnest existence is complicated by thorny problems, a low-down sadistic neighbor, Hugh being summoned to defend the Confederacy, and then there are the slaves.

Except for their love of each other and their three children, each salient fact of their lives is on a collision course. And when circumstances explode, Hugh must leave to fight in the widow-making fields of Shiloh.

He leaves Serena to run the plantation, and she will become vulnerable to the lawlessness and random brutality that accompanies war. With her husband away Serena assists at a military hospital and comes face to face with the horrors of battle. But the worst is yet to come.

*Hallam's War* captures the experiences of people swept up in the fury of war. Yet its sensitive deliberation does justice to issues that still strike at the heart of America.

### About the Author

Elisabeth Payne Rosen has led an extraordinary life. Debuting as a novelist may be no more surprising than becoming an ordained deacon in 1994 or once walking Civil War battlefields with the famed Shelby Foote.

Yet her life contains the cherished ordinary, too. A mother of two, she has been married to film and theatre producer Martin Rosen for 40 years. During the couple's 13-year stay in London, she volunteered at a suicide prevention center. The experience awaked a desire for permanent work in the field. After returning to the United States, she enrolled in a clergy internship program and now works as a hospital Chaplain in Marin County. It required three years of intensive study, but Rosen never shied away from the scholarly

She did ten years of research before writing *Hallam's War*. For three of those, she says she "read like a fiend."

### Interview with the Author

**This novel was apparently a tremendous undertaking. How long did it take you to research it? How long did it take to write it? Did you do all of the research first?**

How long did it take to research *Hallam's War*? Counting the two or three years I read like a fiend before I even thought about turning my obsession into a novel, I'd say ten years. But that was all a pleasure! Now I have many of the books I use as reference right here in my study, and (along with using the Internet for the final redraft, three years ago), that makes for a total of somewhere around 12 years. In between was a gap of more than fifteen years in which an earlier draft sat under the bed. I had submitted it through an agent to several New York houses and

didn't get a bite, but in the meantime, on the advice of an English friend, had also submitted it for the Historical Novel Prize awarded jointly by The Bodley Head and Corgi Books in London, where it was the first American entry ever short-listed and one of the final two contestants. That may all sound like a defeat, after ten years' work, but for me it was thrilling to think that five prominent judges had actually read my book and had complimentary things to say about it.

**How did you become so interested in the Civil War?**

I only became a "history buff" after my extraordinary awakening to the Civil War (please see my Q&A). Even now, I can't quite decide whether I'm a history buff or only a "southern past" buff, of whom there are LEGION. But I'm not the magnolia and moonlight type, though it's true that a certain kind of soft, early, fragrant morning, before the sweltering heat you know is waiting to lay you low, is powerfully evocative for me. Like nothing else.

**Did older relatives in your family pass down stories of the Civil War? If so, please talk a bit about those anecdotes.**

No, no older relatives passed down any stories of the Civil War; in fact, my mother initially was slightly disapproving of my new obsession. She had grown up in Monroe, Louisiana (born 1913, still alive and well today) and felt that the war was already "too much with us" in the South. She thought people ought to just let it go, to move on. But my mother is famously unsentimental and didn't talk that much about her own childhood, except to be grateful for it as having been unusually happy. She had a sister, for whom I am named, and two beloved brothers, both lost in the Pacific in WW II. Hugh Hallam's cotton broker, Warren Platt, is named for her father, whom I never knew.

It was my father who talked most about his childhood, his home, his past. He was the middle of seven brothers, growing up on a cotton plantation outside of Greenville, Mississippi. (Years later, when one of my uncles took it over, he had all the stationery changed from "Loughborough Plantation" to "Loughborough Farm", for much the same reason Hugh Hallam called his place "Palmyra Farm.") There were at least two elderly women living there when my father was a little boy who had been born into slavery. As I was growing up and we spent vacations and Christmas there (something we LOVED, and which obviously went very deep in me), cotton was still picked by hand. There were several black families who lived on the place and worked for my grandfather; I knew many of them well—or as well as a child can. I can't think that I would have been able to write the scenes with French and Able and Markie and Mary Ann, if I had not grown up in such a milieu.

**Your white characters display a range of different attitudes toward race and slavery. Is your portrayal of that variety based on your research, your instincts as a writer, your own background, or a combination? Please explain.**

About my white characters "range of different ideas towards race and slavery": in the South, as everywhere else, there is a wide range of human emotions, prejudice and experience about race. I feel very strongly (as you may gather from reading the book) that an unexamined self-righteousness on the subject has been a hindrance to real reconciliation, all the way down the line, and, vis-à-vis the Civil War, that self-righteousness and intransigence existed on both sides. Speaking personally, it has been a great joy and satisfaction over the years for me to have added many African-American friends and colleagues to my circle of relationships. I feel that on some level I was deprived of these, growing up as I did in the segregated South.

**Your book acknowledges Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a great force in the politics of its day. Do you think a novel could have that much social power in this day and age?**

I wish it were true that a book—any book—could have that kind of influence today! More likely, it would be a film or a play (or a video on YouTube) that would be the catalyst.

**How did you come to be a deacon? Does any of your work as a clergy person inspire your work as a writer or vice versa?**

I have been a devout Episcopalian all my life. During the 13 years we lived in London, I volunteered at an organization called the Samaritans, which exists “To Befriend the Suicidal and Despairing”—listening both over the telephone and in person.

Years later, here in California, when I had finished my book and sent it off to my agent, I realized I wanted to do that kind of work again—only this time, not as a volunteer. I heard of an internship that was opening at my local hospital to be trained as a chaplain, and thinking it might be interesting, I applied. I got the internship and on the first afternoon of shadowing the Chaplain there, I was, what can I say? Bowled over. I knew that this was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. And that has never changed. I began the process toward ordination as a deacon (three years of all-day classes on the weekends, massive home study, papers, field ed, etc.) and was ordained in 1994, but it would be fair to say that I was “called” to the hospital first; that it was that that led to ordination as a deacon and not the other way around.

Oh, and incidentally, I had already written all the hospital scenes before this ever happened!

**Obviously, you are a history buff. The attitude in the United States today has been called “ahistoric.” Many younger Americans seem to know or care little about history. Do you agree with that observation? If so or not, why?**

Yes, it seems to be true that young people know very little about history today, and that's frightening, but on the other hand, we're always thinking the younger generation is going to hell in a hand basket, aren't we? My ambition is that through my novel, or good historically-based fiction in general, people may be awakened to an interest in history they might not otherwise have had. And that that might lead, say, in terms of American history in particular, to a more thoughtful and complex and responsible way of responding to the incredible problems we are facing today.

**What do you hope people will learn from your book?**

One of the things I'm hearing from people who've read my book—especially young people—is that it made them want to know more about the Civil War. My hope is that, seeing events through the eyes of several fairly complex characters, they will begin to ponder these things for themselves and to make the connections. The parallels with the current political situation are uncanny.

**Please tell us a bit about your husband and children.**

I have been married to the same man for 40 years. Our daughter is a writer and lives in Denver, as does my son, who is married with three children. I grew up in Shreveport, Louisiana, and retain many contacts there—though neither my mother nor any of my four siblings still lives there.

**Who are your favorite writers? What are your favorite books?**

My favorite writers are Tolstoy, Iris Murdoch, and any of a dozen or more classic and modern writers on spirituality and prayer. And, I would have to add, the four evangelists and the David of the Psalms.

<http://unbridledbooks.com/hallamswar.html>

Among my favorite books are *WAR AND PEACE*; all sixteen of Iris Murdoch's novels; *THE CALL OF STORIES*, by Robert Coles; *THE SCOTTISH CHIEFS*, by Jane Porter; and once again, the Bible. I have to say, I have found it astonishing to realize how ignorant otherwise highly educated people are of the Bible, which—whatever one's religious beliefs—is the bedrock literature of Western civilization. People who wouldn't dream of not being reasonably knowledgeable about, say, Shakespeare, are totally blank on the Bible.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What indicators show us that John Varick may not be completely objective?
2. What kind of man is Hugh? What are some of the contradictions he lives with?
3. Would you call Serena a strong woman? If so or not, why?
4. Do you think that the Civil War was necessary? Could not an agreement be reached about slavery and land issues to prevent the two sides from going to battle?
5. In what way(s) are there parallels between the issues of race and politics explored in the novel and our contemporary political situation?
6. What is the Hallams' relationship to the land? And what sort of life does the couple want for their family?
7. Were it not for slavery, what kind of lives can you imagine that French, Belle, and Mary Ann might have had.
8. What are the story's implications for young black female slaves? Do they have any protection from being raped? Why or why not? And how might the traditions of slavery reverberate in the black family experience today?
9. Were there mistakes made at Shiloh? If so, what mistakes?
10. What was the true nature of the relationship between French and Hallam? How would you describe how Hallam regarded French? How would you describe how French regarded Hallam?
11. Aside from the Union, what other things were the Hallams at war with?
12. This book is well-researched. Did you learn anything new from it? What do you know about the Civil War now that you did not know before?
13. Do you feel that the Civil War was the price the nation paid for its sins?

### **Recommended Reading**

*Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty* by John W. De Forest

*Shiloh* by Shelby Foote

<http://unbridledbooks.com/hallamswar.html>

*Cold Mountain* by Charles Frazier

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs

*The Known World* by Edward P. Jones

*Gone With the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell

*Beloved* by Toni Morrison

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe